

Article

Reconsidering ‘Desire’ and ‘Style’: A Lefebvrian Approach to Democratic Orientation in Planning

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Abstract

In Henri Lefebvre’s theory, the space in process of social production is regarded as the very condition of accomplishing the ‘desire’ to do or to create something. This article argues that we need to understand the implications of the ‘desire’ in order to make use of his urban theory in today’s planning. Introducing this idea, in the 1960s and 1970s, Lefebvre attempted to create our own style of living, that is, to produce the appropriated space which differed from the technocratically-planned spaces where people devote themselves into repetitively fulfilling their needs for specific objects like a laboratory rat in the experiment of looped system. For all his utopian strategies, Lefebvre made practical suggestions on turning our cities more desire-based, that is to say, more democratically designed; it would be very helpful for today’s urban planning to go back to his argument on the difference between ‘desire’ and ‘need’, or the connection between ‘desire’ and the style of living.

Keywords

cybernanthropie; democratic planning; desire; difference; functionalism; Henri Lefebvre; need; orientation; style

Issue

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1. Introduction

In the last paragraph of his *Production of Space*, French metaphilosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre rounds it off with the characteristic term: “I speak of an *orientation* advisedly. We are concerned with nothing more and nothing less than that” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 423, italics in original). It is quite important for us to attempt to make the best use of his theory in our age, to investigate how and for what the orientation is made. By reference to previous studies, we can associate the objects of Lefebvre’s orientation with various keywords: differential space (Leary-Owhin, 2016; Wolf & Mahaffey, 2016), autogestion (Ronneberger, 2009; Trebitsch, 2003), realization of the right to the city, that is, true urban democracy (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2012; Purcell, 2008, 2013), and in the more abstract expression, the possible (Hess, 2009; Pinder, 2015; Sünker, 2014). Then, what can we find at the root of them?

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, Lefebvre uses the same keyword in several writings and connects it with the confrontation between ‘growth’ and ‘development’. In his *Space and Politics*, Lefebvre writes that “stop growth purely and simply? It’s impossible. What is needed is to orient it by reducing it; it must be oriented towards qualitative social development” (Lefebvre, 1973, p. 156). Similarly, in his *Urban Revolution*, originally published in 1970, the orientation of production is put side-by-side with “the rejection of economic (quantitative) growth” and “the primacy of (qualitative) development overgrowth” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 163). What it comes down to is that by the term orientation, Lefebvre intended to overcome his contemporary society possessed by the idea of growth.

In his *Methodology of Sciences*, written around 1946, Lefebvre pointed out the direction of growth towards development, that is, he thought that growth gave rise to the appearance of types of society (Lefebvre, 2002,

p. 146). Here, growth was defined as that of technique, of labour productivity, of human power over nature. And yet, about 20 years later, Lefebvre (1973) faced the harsh world of reality; growth as “a large accumulation” of money, technique, information and knowledge, in general, became an end in itself and this accumulation was centralised. As a result, power relations between the centre of society and people in the periphery, who could not apply knowledge to improve their own lives, were strengthened and people without sufficient knowledge were involved in the process of this accumulation which could not make society go beyond what it was, but only exacerbate the situation.

Lefebvre called such a society “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption” (Lefebvre, 1967, p. 55, 1996, p. 147, 2000b, p. 65) and there, he detected the tendency of people to act like “cybernanthropes”, a model of workers and consumers characterised by three aspects: a) he/she prefers a minimisation of risk and high efficiency; b) he/she “aspires to function, that is, to be only a function”; and c) he/she “ignores desire [*désir*]” and “only has needs [*besoins*]” (Lefebvre, 1967, pp. 213–215). Lefebvre names this tendency “absence of style” and claims that what we need to triumph over cybernanthropes is “Style” (capitalized), which he recognised in “the level of desire” in his *Metaphilosophy* (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 322).

Though David Harvey (2012), using the phrase “his [man’s] heart’s desire” of American urban sociologist Robert Park (1967), has already defined ‘the right to the city’ as the “right to change and reinvent the city more after our own hearts’ desire” (Harvey, 2012, pp. 3–4), we, unlike him, try to reread Lefebvre’s space theory with his own concept of ‘desire’. With this view, we connect the term ‘orientation’ in *The Production of Space* and the phrase “the lack of desire”, a third feature of the cybernanthrope, and built the following hypothesis: the more desire-based the spaces become, the more developed our society can be. In fact, when the desire is mentioned, we can be reminded of the following sentences in *The Production of Space*:

Within time, the investment of effect, of energy, of ‘creativity’ opposes a mere passive apprehension of signs and signifiers. Such an investment, the desire to ‘do’ something and hence to ‘create’, can only be accomplished [*s’accomplir*] in a space—and through the production of a space. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 393)

Here, Lefebvre presents the production of space as the means of fulfilment of people’s desire. In other words, by the production of space, Lefebvre tried to break through a situation where style had degenerated into culture defined as the level of need, that is, “subdivided into everyday culture for the masses and higher culture, a split that led into specialisation and decay” (Lefebvre, 2000b, p. 30). As Busquet (2013) says, we need to contemplate how we should make “a better spatial planning that does

not go against” the people’s desires. Therefore, it is the examination of the relationship between need, desire, and style in Lefebvre’s texts that takes precedence over everything else.

This article explores this triadic relation and clarifies the great importance of ‘desires’ in the thoughts of democratic planning today, returning to Lefebvre’s writings in the 1960s and 1970s. Among others, these three books are mainly mentioned below: *Critique of Everyday Life II* (originally published in 1961 and hereinafter called “*Critique II*”), *Metaphilosophy* (originally published in 1965) and *The Production of Space* (originally published in 1974). In *Critique II* and in the foreword to the second edition of *Critique of Everyday life: Introduction*, written during 1956–1957, Lefebvre first put the ‘needs’ as one of the main themes in his series of critique of everyday life. Then, in *Metaphilosophy*, the desire and the style were both defined as the ‘residue’ in our everyday life, different from the state, organisations or cybernetics, which are defined as ‘power’, and what is more, as mentioned above, the desire is made clear as the foundation of style. This set of need, desire, and style were connected with the subject of space in the early 1970s.

This article begins by discussing needs from a chronological perspective and clarifies existing issues (see Section 2). Then, we make a distinction between needs followed by ‘the lack of style’ and the desires making style possible and examine the assumption on which Lefebvre makes the schema of desire-style-difference (see Section 3). Finally, from the perspective of “spatialising a social activity” (Lefebvre, 2000a, p. 12), we attempt to link the problem of desires to the urban revolution and the possible planning (see Section 4).

2. Need in Lefebvre’s Works: From the Chronological Perspective

In the introduction of *From the Rural to the Urban*, written in 1969, Lefebvre emphasises the difficulty of understanding the “dialectical, that is, conflictual and moving relation between the desire and the need” (Lefebvre, 2001, p. 15). Though we also need to understand that, if we try to draw lessons from his dialectical thought, it is most essential for us to grasp the true meanings of each concept first.

Admittedly, there is a difference between the two concepts, but it is not yet clear. Shields (1999) and Busquet (2013) are the ones who have pointed out the importance of desire, but they do not sufficiently mention Lefebvre’s implication of need. On the contrary, Stanek (2011) focuses entirely on the need. Certainly, his consideration is of great importance because it reveals Lefebvre’s critiques on functionalism which localises “in a pre-existing space, a need or a function” (Lefebvre, 2000a, p. 12). However, it regards the needs as the theme after *Critique of Everyday Life I* (hereinafter, referred to as *Critique I*), that is, it ignores the earlier writings, and furthermore, unlike Lefebvre’s formularisation, it contrasts the

needs not with the desires but with the practices. While referring to this research, we aim to dig deeper into the issues related to needs and desires.

From the chronological perspective, the times when Lefebvre made reference to needs can be divided into three periods; from the 1930s to the 1940s, from the late 1950s to the early 1960s, and from the late 1960s to the 1970s. In the first period, Lefebvre merely refers to needs or the relationship between needs and desires. However, because “Lefebvre’s philosophy of needs and desires is built around the question of how people produce themselves” (Shields, 1999, pp. 136–137), we should, first and foremost, return to his *Dialectical Materialism* (1940) that has the part named “the production of humans”. In this work, referring to Marx’s 1844 Manuscripts, Lefebvre criticises the “economic man” who has only one need, that is, “need for money [*besoin d’argent*]” (Lefebvre, 1940). This need, which is simplified more than that of animals, makes people self-interested. Lefebvre contrasts this image of an economic man living in “solitude” and his own concept of “total man”, the result of the true production of humans: “[t]he total man is a free individual in a free community. He is the individuality which has bloomed into the limitless variety of possible individualities” (Lefebvre, 1940, p. 161). The term ‘freedom’ not separated from ‘free community’ is one of the slogans in the writings in this period, as well as in *Critique I* and *Marxism*, originally published in 1948 (Lefebvre, 1948). Lefebvre’s *Critique I* states that “free community” means the state where the social group, the country or the class to which we belong is free from slavery to other countries or classes (Lefebvre, 2014a, p. 192). Through the “effective participation in the running of the social whole”, that is, in the production of social space in the broad sense, individuals will also escape from the state of being enslaved to something materially or mentally and become able to exert a force on anything concretely (Lefebvre, 2014a, p. 192). At that time, Lefebvre did not have the idea of production of space, but we can observe, in the relation between the economic man and the total man, the prototype of the contrast between needs and desires.

In the third period (from the late 1960s to the 1970s), however, this contrast is clearly highlighted, especially in *Metaphilosophy* and *Position*, where Lefebvre castigates the cybernanthropes who ignore desires and have only “the need for this or that” [*besoin de ceci ou de cela*] (Lefebvre, 1967, p. 215), that is, the need associated with the specific object. This type of need is compared to that of a laboratory rat in the “looped” system experiment:

When the rat touches a pedal in its cage, it triggers the stimulus and feels pleasure....Only exhaustion and sleep prevent the rat from continuing until it dies of fatigue, this scientifically perfected onanism that simulates and reproduces pleasure. (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 236)

Like this rat, the cybernanthropes are defined as the people who pursue the satisfaction of needs stimulated by the external, for example, an advertisement or planned obsolescence of products. Of course, as Stanek (2011) says, the functionalism in urban planning and building is one of those stimulants. In other words, through functionalism, the problem of needs is connected to our living space.

By introducing the concept of ‘deviant’ and ‘terrorism’ that comes from terror, Lefebvre presents his image of a disciplinary society where achieving function has great importance. This ‘deviant’, like Foucault’s concept of ‘the abnormal’, is the man who does not recognise the social code, that is, does not fulfil his own function as a worker, consumer, male, and so on, and who is socially excluded as a madman (Foucault, 1999). Because of this terror of social exclusion, says Lefebvre, “each member is a terrorist because he wants to be in power (if only briefly); thus, there is no need for a dictator; each member betrays and chastises himself” (Lefebvre, 2000b, p. 126). In other words, each place or social position has codes that are arranged by the rule of organisations, urban planning, advertising media, or obsolescence of goods, and that forces people to act in a particular way. At this point, supposedly, one can sometimes arrange the need in a specific space as a member of a company or an organisation, and at other times follow the code of specific need. Thus, to have specific need is to follow the written code passively and therefore there is no subjective freedom in the world of arranged needs.

Then, Lefebvre reformulated human freedom from the perspective of needs and aimed at the “restoration of desire”: “[h]uman freedom involves a liberation in relation to needs. It has to detach itself from them, but only by multiplying them, intensifying them” (Lefebvre, 2016, pp. 321–322). This is why Lefebvre had to tackle the matter of realisation of desires separate from needs.

From the above, it is obvious that Lefebvre’s treatment of the question of needs was changed, during the second period (circa the late 1950s to the early 1960s), from Marxian attitude to his own. Indeed, Lefebvre expressed his pessimistic view of the absolute elimination of alienation that Marx had written (Lefebvre, 1995, p. 143). He conceived rather the aggravation of alienation and called it the “colonisation” of the everyday life: “[a]s Guy Debord so energetically put it, everyday life has literally been ‘colonised’. It has been brought to an extreme point of alienation” (Lefebvre, 2014a, p. 305). In the foreword to the second edition of *Critique I*, written in 1956–1957, Lefebvre has already prosecuted the manipulation of needs in his contemporary society. Then, in *Critique II*, such a society is named “colonised” society as stated above. There, the consumers’ characteristic is expressed in the same terms as the cybernanthropes’ in later years: “[t]he consumer does not desire” (Lefebvre, 2014a, p. 304). Therefore, it is assumed that it is because his outlook on the elimination of alienation, that is, on the production of total man, was getting worse

that Lefebvre began trying to turn the need-based society into the desire-based society.

3. Desire, Style, and the Difference

Lefebvre, in *Hegel-Marx-Nietzsche or the Underworld* (1975), distinguishes Nietzsche's conception of 'desire' from Marx's critique of the 'need', so it is considered that he returns to Nietzsche to compensate for the flaw in Marx's ideas (Lefebvre, 1975). In fact, a year before the publication of this book, Lefebvre connected his own dialectical thought with Nietzsche's grand desire: "Nietzsche's Grand Desire...seeks to overcome the divisions...between repetitive and differential, or needs and desires" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 392). Here, Lefebvre arranges the differential and the desire in a row, but what kind of relationship do they have? In this section, we are to discuss the relation between desires, style, and the difference and link it to urban theories.

Lefebvre adds weight to the 'style' in the context of critiques on structuralism in the 1960s. What is the most notable for us, here, is the archetype of cybernanthrope, namely, the concept of 'structural man'. Roland Barthes, in his article "The Structuralist Activity", originally published in 1962, wrote that 'structural man' is defined "by the way in which he mentally experiences structure" (Barthes, 1972, p. 214). On this concept of structural man, the image of homogeneity of people is superimposed by Lefebvre. He criticises that what structural men see as style is "quite simply an absence of style" and that structural man just "simulates", that is, imitates the real (Lefebvre, 2016, pp. 173–174). Therefore, Lefebvre's critique of structuralism is, from the actual perspective, that of homogeneity of society.

And yet needs are connected not only with homogeneity but also with superficial diversity, because 'needs for this or that' are those for custom [*personnalis e*] goods: "[t]he ideal, perfect consumer...is the completed 'personalisation'. Personalisation has for content the custom [*personnalis e*] car, the custom [*personnalis e*] furniture" (Lefebvre, 1966, p. 172). Thus, style is opposed to mimesis and to personalisation, and hence, to have style is to be truly different.

For Lefebvre, style stands at the level of desire (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 322) and the dialectical movement of desire and need—between style and culture—"cannot help but produce differences" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 395). Therefore, it is considered that the most fundamental factor of Lefebvre's 'orientation' is desire and that we should think about how to make space for our desire in the society where needs exercise great influence. In reality, our desire and need are often difficult to discern, and styles originally created in accordance with desire may be caught in mass or higher culture. That is especially why we must always insist on what space or society we want to live in and participate in its creation in order to avoid the tyranny of culture which makes us homogenous and passive. As we see below, this does not mean

rejecting cultural products. Rather, it is necessary to sort them into the acceptable and the unacceptable and use them well for our creation.

However, why does the matter of need and desire become that of space? Lefebvre explains that as follows:

Particular places serve to define the coming-together of a given need and a given object, and they are in turn defined by that meeting. Space is thus populated by visible crowds of objects and invisible crowds of needs. (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 394)

In this way, each space is imagined as the cage where the experiment rat lives. In these spaces characterised by specific needs or functions, we repetitively aim to satisfy ourselves, and only exhaustion and sleep prevent us. The desires linked with 'creation' are expected to oppose the needs reiterated in specific spaces, to reconstruct those spaces and to bring differences to the homogeneity of society. With the proviso, however, those needs are also necessary to some degree, because "everyday life would become odious and social practice impossible if the dialectician could intervene everywhere, at every turn, at every moment" (Lefebvre, 1971, p. 54).

In *Explosion*, Lefebvre has already pointed out that Marcuse's theory on needs concerning *Eros* "neglects the urban problematic". (Lefebvre, 1998, p. 27) Consequently, it is around 1968 that Lefebvre conceptualised desire as one of the roots of urban problems and since then, he has pursued the possibility that "the urban could also be defined as a place of desire" (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 176).

Lefebvre's ideal of those days was the establishment of "small groups and micro-societies" that could create our own style (Lefebvre, 1995, p. 231). As Neil Brenner and Christian Schmid (2015) say, however, today we live in the age of 'planetary urbanisation' and have to develop a new urban epistemology "that might illuminate the emergent conditions, processes, and transformations associated with a world of generalised urbanisation" (Brenner & Schmid, 2015, p. 155). For this purpose, what kind of contribution can this schema of desire-style-difference make?

4. Participation and Democratic Planning for a Place of Desire

For Lefebvre, "it is not a question of locating a need or a function in the pre-existing space, but rather of spatialising a social activity, linked to a practice as a whole, by producing an appropriate space" (Lefebvre, 2000a, p. 12). To spatialise social activities, in our context, may be the same as to spatialise our desires. However, how can we associate desires with urban spaces?

Going back to the long quote of *The Production of Space* in the first section of this article, we can find, in the relationship between desires and needs, the confrontation between "the investment of affect, of energy, of 'cre-

ativity” and “a mere passive apprehension of signs and signifiers”, that is, between activity and passivity (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 393) So, from our perspective, to orient needs for desires is probably, at the same time, to orient passivity towards activity, that is, creation, participation, and democracy. The urban revolution is surely the aforementioned orientation. “The passivity of those involved, their silence, their reticent prudence are an indication of the absence of urban democracy; that is, concrete democracy. Urban revolution and concrete (developed) democracy coincide” (Lefebvre, 2003, p. 137). The absence of desire and style is here not only that of difference but also that of democracy. In other words, Lefebvre’s urban theory can be read as the critique of cybernantes who are satisfied with his present society. This vision was maintained until at least 1989 (Lefebvre, 2014b).

Then, how can planning contribute to the urban revolution? Lefebvre does not define it clearly, but raises the question of planning in a broad sense as follows: “[b]efore their [‘ordinary’ people’s] eyes, society was being atomised, dissociation into individuals and fragments....Since the concept of planning was still somewhat vague, there was no objection to this atomistic and molecular vision of the social” (Lefebvre, 2003, pp. 184–185). Thus, the vagueness of the very concept of planning is a factor in making people passive and individualistic.

What Lefebvre needs is the planning of the social as ‘the total’. In his own words, as Madden (2012) also cites, that is a planning of “a ‘world’, neither a completely empty nor a completely full one” (Lefebvre, 1995, p. 124). In his article named “democratic planning”, published a year before *Urban Revolution*, Lefebvre returns to Marx and there finds the equivalent of desire, which is the concept of ‘social need’ which is classified in the field of sociology rather than economics: “[s]ocial needs are those of individuals and groups, conceived while taking into account the level of culture and civilisation attained by global society, with its specific characteristics and originality” and these social needs “react on the needs” (Lefebvre, 1969, p. 92). Lefebvre defines social needs in planning as a requirement of collective facilities corresponding to the requirements of culture and civilisation. As a very simple example, he presents a case of the adoption of the bathroom and of the central heating system. It is unthinkable for people to live in a building without this equipment, and hence, those who want to sell the rooms have no choice but to renovate their rooms while taking much cost. According to Lefebvre (1969), like in this case, the social needs perpetually react on the economic needs. This is, however, nothing less than the case of negative participation. Now, we need to examine the more active participation.

For Lefebvre, to participate in something together actively is to be together: “[t]o be together is to do something together. Something, even if it is only a game. It’s to have a common activity. It’s to work together, to cre-

ate a work [*une œuvre*] or a product together” (Lefebvre, 1966, p. 163). In the case of urban planning, there are two probable choices regarding active participation, but they are two sides of the same coin. On the one hand, the polyfunctional spaces with playful or symbolic functions can be planned against functionalism, which fixes in the space a specific function or a need. Indeed in his interview, Lefebvre criticises the functionalistic building that gives the empty space one specific function like that of a parking space. And there, he emphasises the importance of leaving the empty space “completely free” and opening the possibility of a more “animated space” where people can, on their own initiatives, “make a boutique”, or dance, or do something fun (Régnier, 1972). This is the production of the free space for creating works that are potentially polyfunctional, which is the first step in making the “‘world’, neither a completely empty nor a completely full one” (Lefebvre, 1995, p. 124).

On the other hand, Lefebvre says more radically that there is a possibility for us to change the city itself into our work [*œuvre*], that is, the space of “grassroots democracy (*autogestion*)” (Lefebvre, 2014b, p. 205). In the 1960s, he conceptualised as “deviants” the men who remained outside of the homogeneity of the society and was treated as a madman by cybernantes, and he saw them as powerless beings. However, as Hess (2009) writes, Lefebvre redefines the men who remain in the periphery of urban homogeneity as “the men of the borders” (*l’hommes des frontières*) in his *Presence and absence*:

It is true that under the conditions of the modern world only the man apart, the marginal, the peripheral, the anomic, the excluded from the horde...has a creative capacity....Who is most likely to work [*œuvrer*], would it not be the man of the borders? (Lefebvre, 1980, p. 202)

It is considered that Lefebvre kept hoping that the “fight” to the social spaces by these ‘men of the borders’ enables the future autogestion, grassroots democracy: “[s]pontaneous architecture and planning...prove greatly superior to the organisation of space by specialists” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 374).

In the age of ‘planetary urbanisation’, have these men of borders disappeared yet? Have the possibilities of class struggle through social spaces been completely lost? No, they have not. Whenever people gain their own absolutely free, but not absolutely empty, spaces, new men of borders emerge. Through the two ways mentioned above, thus, the work [*œuvre*] and the space characterised by the difference and the style, will arise. In fact, when Lefebvre discusses the struggle by shanty towns against urban homogeneity in *The Production of Space*, he presupposes that the appropriation of space in the shanty towns has reached a remarkably high level and the spontaneity of architecture and urban planning there (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 374). For the ‘orientation’,

we first need the free space for this spontaneousness. And what we expect from planning experts is to create the space which becomes the first scaffold for people to design cities with their own creativity. With reference to the discussion of porosity of the city in Benjamin's (1986) "Naples", Stavrides (2010) has already conceptualised the free, polyfunctional and public space that cities and streets essentially contain as a 'threshold' where people can meet and create something together, and regarded it as an important factor to realise the right to the city. However, we need to plan this porosity intentionally and to make space for spontaneous creation. From this point of view, the discussion of Lefebvre has a high affinity with the strategy of temporary space—or pop-up space, if you want to call it—in recent urban planning, in which people can freely and temporally make up small spaces of their own in the towns or streets. That is because, as Temel (2006) says, this type of strategy enables 'bottom-up' planning. However, it must be avoided that temporary or pop-up spaces end in a single time or become a seasonal event that embeds commercial 'need'. In order to stimulate the collaborative and voluntary creativity of people, it is necessary to have such a planning strategy that people can participate in such temporary free space in cities. Continuing to provide such a space for participation is an important first step towards democratic planning. In other words, with permanent participation in the orientation of our society, the urban can be defined as 'a place of desire'.

5. Conclusions

In this article, we tried to clarify the whole picture of the series of thought concerning Lefebvre's concept of "desire" which has not been sufficiently studied so far, and to connect it to urban theory. First of all, starting with the consideration of the implications of the word "orientation" used in the conclusion of *The Production of Space*, we have revealed that Lefebvre's consideration is premised on the existence of cybernanthropes who have no desire and have only needs when preaching the importance of transition from growth to development.

Then we classified the works of Lefebvre referring to needs in three periods and revealed the features of the discussion at each time. As a result, it turned out that Lefebvre's argument about needs changed around 1960 when he became pessimistic regarding the end of alienation.

It is the concept of desire that is opposed to this concept of need. The third section clarified the relationship between styles and differences, and the position of the concept of desire as the foundation of these two concepts, mainly referring to the works written in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Finally, by focusing on the pair of passivity and activity corresponding to that of needs and desires, this article showed the possibility of making the urban-based on our desires. There is, however, still room for further con-

sideration on the relation between Lefebvre's concept of desire or need and that of other urban theorists.

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Conflict of Interests

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